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RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5704
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0450
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2440
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001533

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2017

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AMBASSADOR PRESSES FOREIGN MINISTER ON
HUMAN RIGHTS

REF: SECSTATE 146746

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. Reasons: 1.4(b, d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Foreign Minister Bogollagama requested a meeting with Ambassador on November 7 to follow up on Under Secretary Burns's October meetings with President Rajapaksa

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in New York and the Foreign Minister in Washington (reftel). He and his staff expressed frustration at their lack of success in persuading both official and civil society critics of the Sri Lankan government's human rights record that the situation was improving. Ambassador pushed back, saying that aside from a decline of the number of abductions Colombo, human rights abuses continued and conditions in Jaffna were especially alarming. He said that the security forces had it well within their grasp to rein in the violations. Ambassador noted that U.S. military assistance to Sri Lanka was in jeopardy unless the human rights situation improved, and urged the government to accept a presence of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as a first, necessary step. End summary.

12. (C) Ambassador and Pol Chief met Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama at the Minister's request on November 7 to discuss the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. The Minister underlined that Sri Lanka sought a dialogue on human rights with friendly countries, as well as with its detractors in the NGO community. Ambassador responded that Sri Lanka was suffering from a credibility problem on human rights. What U/S Burns and others were seeking was an aggressive effort to rein in the parts of the security forces that are committing human rights abuses. The Ambassador noted that there was a general consensus that the incidence of abductions in the Colombo area had declined significantly. But the situation in the rest of the country had not improved, and in places may have gotten worse.

13. (C) The human rights environment in Jaffna, in particular, gave rise to grave concern, Ambassador said. He

emphasized that excuses were not credible; the military had it well within its power to change tactics and achieve results in Jaffna, as it demonstrated when abuses stopped for 2-3 weeks after Ambassador's visit to Jaffna in December 2006 and again after Assistant Secretary Boucher's visit in May 2007. The answer was not to resort to extrajudicial killings of all those suspected of links to the Tamil Tigers. They should be arrested, and if necessary, put in remand custody in Colombo. Statistics on arrest and inquiries were unconvincing because these actions rarely, if ever, led to convictions of those responsible. The Minister observed that the situation in Jaffna appeared to be "not good" but said he needed to be better informed. He asked his staff to arrange a briefing on Jaffna from the military. Minister Bogollagama said he would arrange a meeting with officers of the Criminal Investigation Division who were working on the U.S. list of the disappeared to resolve the lingering questions and invited Ambassador and Embassy staff to participate. We accepted.

14. (C) Director General for Public Communication Ravinatha Ariyasinghe complained that while the Ministry had provided the same information contained in its Aide Memoire for the State Department (ref *) to human rights NGOs and Senator Leahy's staff in Washington, Sri Lanka's side of the story was not getting through. He postulated a "time lag" on the U.S. side. He also noted that Sri Lankan Ambassador to the U.S. Bernard Goonetilleke, despite repeated requests, had been unable to obtain an appointment with Senator Leahy.

15. (C) Bogollagama explained that the government faced internal problems in responding to pressure from the U.S. on human rights. He noted that some of the ideological allies of the current government were anti-imperialists who

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questioned everything the government did to draw closer to the U.S. He pleaded for time for the government to "get their expectations right." U.S. assistance to the Sri Lanka military, since as the impending turnover of radar installations and Rigid Inflatable Hull (RIB) boats was very visible and very helpful. The Ambassador noted that future assistance of this kind was in jeopardy absent significant human rights improvements.

16. (C) The Ambassador pressed the Minister on the question of a presence of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human rights (OHCHR) in Sri Lanka, saying that the lack of response by Sri Lankan national institutions made such a mission imperative. Bogollagama indicated that Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe had the lead on the issue, but that the GSL was hoping to resolve differences on specifics on the OHCHR presence through dialogue with Louise Arbour's staff. The Ambassador stressed that Sri Lanka needed to do this in order to show that it had nothing to hide - despite expected criticism from Sinhalese nationalist groups.

17. (C) Communications Director Ariyasinghe said the government was doing its best to work on the list of 355 names of disappeared persons that Embassy had conveyed to the government in April 2007. He expressed confusion over how the names of some of those who had subsequently been located got onto the list in the first place. (Note: we did not respond since there are very few such cases, and we were not in a position to divulge our sources.) Ariyasinghe also cited difficulties in "moving around" in Jaffna as an obstacle to such an investigation.

18. (C) COMMENT: The Foreign Affairs Ministry is now well aware of the dimensions of the credibility problem the government suffers, but appears at a loss how to deal with it. We will continue to insist on a real change in the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, particularly in Jaffna. However, as we told Minister Bogollagama, the solution to the problem does not lie in a better public relations effort by his Ministry. It will take a decision by the security

forces, especially Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa and
Army Commander Fonseka to stop using abusive
counterinsurgency tactics before we will see a durable
improvement the human rights environment in Sri Lanka.
BLAKE